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## Responsibilisation, ideologies and professional identities in Danish youth social work

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# **Neoliberalism, Nordic Welfare States and Social Work**

Current and Future Challenges

**Edited by Masoud Kamali and  
Jessica H. Jönsson**

and Jonathan Doherty

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## 9 **Responsibilisation, ideologies and professional identities in Danish youth social work**

*Kathrine Vitus*

### **Changing social pedagogy identities**

Since the 1990s, neoliberal political developments in Denmark have led to economic, managerial, organisational and ideological changes in public policies and services (McGregor 2001, Vitus 2012, 2016, Vitus et al. 2016). At the centre of these changes have been continuous negotiations of definitions and distributions of *responsibility* for welfare among the state and its professionals, vis-à-vis citizens and the civil society. These changes and negotiations have challenged the roles and identities of not only citizens, but also social work professionals working with youth. Social workers' professional identities are particularly influenced by social policies. And whilst political agendas do not determine these professions, they nevertheless contribute to shaping their identity and defining their purpose (Lorenz 2008, p. 626).

In the present transition in Danish social policies from a traditional social interventionist to a neoliberal welfare state ideology, such identity changes can be observed. Professional social workers were previously considered to be experts 'skilled in the use of [the] therapeutic language of social work, of counselling, of clinical psychology and allied positivistic disciplines' (Young 1999, p. 5). These experts were mandated to realise the welfare state's moral and political responsibility for socialising, rehabilitating and assimilating marginalised citizens who were receiving welfare and professional care. This professional identity focused on delivering compensation and inclusive care to marginalised young people in response to their identified deficiencies and troubled lives (Vitus 2016).

In contrast, more contemporary neoliberal political strategies tend to conceive of welfare users as individual 'subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice', whom professionals are assumed to motivate and mobilise (Vitus 2016) in order to enable them to 'shap[e] and utiliz[e] their [own] freedom' (Miller and Rose 2008, p. 212). In Denmark, individual responsibility for welfare – including moral, economic and practical responsibility – is not only promoted through political representation, but also built into systems of reward and punishment within social interventions (e.g. within active employment and cash benefit systems). The assignment of individual user

responsibilities occurs through the new ideological, rhetorical, organisational and professional practice of 'responsibilisation', which refers to the treatment of welfare state actors – both clients and workers – “as having certain responsibilities and making efforts to get them to act according to these responsibilities” (Juhila et al. 2017: 2).

In Danish youth social work, a strong tradition of social pedagogy prevails. Despite the emergence of a neoliberally informed negotiation discourse in the 1990s, the action discourse of the 1970s and 1980s still stands strong in professional self-perception, social pedagogical work and educational environments. The action discourse embeds social pedagogy in a critical, solidary tradition aimed at emancipating marginalised groups through collective empowerment from oppression and authoritative (state) relations (Madsen 2005, pp. 52–61). Professional responsibility and user responsibility are differently defined and negotiated within these professional discourses, and today, practical social pedagogy navigates ambiguous ideological terrains in defining new professional identities.

### **The youth programme and study**

The analysis in this chapter draws on a study conducted in 2010 within a municipal youth programme. The study involved 10 weeks of ethnographic field work in the programme, following the practices of both staff and youth, and interviewing both groups. The programme was conducted in a socially and ethnically mixed borough of a large Danish city and involved youth (aged 13–18) from both the local area and the city. The participants were both ethnic minority and ethnic Danish majority youth. The young people participated in the project five days per week, including two evenings, when they met to cook and share dinner. They enrolled in the programme through the municipal social services centre or via self-recruitment, often as a result of staff outreach. Internally, the target group was described as 'wild youth' – young people who were involved in crime, violence, addiction and grey-zone prostitution. The staff consisted of five social work professionals (four female and one male). While the programme operated with relative pedagogical and organisational autonomy vis-à-vis the municipality, policy changes strongly impacted the programme activities and identities.

### **Practices of youth responsibilisation**

In the youth programme, the development and realisation of various forms of youth responsibility were central pedagogical goals and measures of whether such goals had been met were implemented. Responsibilisation activities facilitated both the structures and daily activities of the programme and the relations among the young people and between staff and the young people.

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*Individual responsibilities*

As formulated by the staff, the primary goal of the social pedagogical work was young people's personal development, as defined and desired by the youth themselves. Each young person developed a personal action plan with a staff member, who recorded the young person's progress towards the development goals every six months. According to the staff, self-development relied on the youth taking individual responsibility. Thus, relationships and pedagogical practices centred on responsabilisation:

It is very clear in my way of interacting with her that our relationship exists in order for [her] to develop. [I]t is about giving responsibility from day one [claps her hands]. You are the boss, you have the code, no one else has it.

(Staff1)

Furthermore, taking responsibility required self-governance through taking charge of personal problems and developing away from these problems:

To take co-responsibility in your own life [is] to become self-governing, being able to govern your own life [...] for instance getting out of criminality [and stopping using] violence as a language. [And if they happen to do it again to] feel miserable about what you have done and more reflected about it [and] get more in control of your borders in relation to your bodies and of what is okay and what is not okay.

(Staff3)

Despite emphasising the young people's own definitions and decisions, the staff promoted specific solutions:

My wishes [for the young people] do not matter compared to their own wishes [...]. [We talk about] how great it is to be independent, because many people are brought up by the system [with the idea that] they can claim this and that from the system, and 'they [the State] must pay this, I have a right to that' [...] [We] get [the young people] to see how cool it is to be independent and self-supportive, and how you can actually become able to control your own life.

(Staff4)

Becoming a responsible, self-governing subject in advanced liberalism (rather than a passive and dependent subject), according to Rose and Miller (1992, pp. 198–199), requires autonomy and decision-making. In the programme, the young people were taught to make individual choices in relation to other people and the welfare system. These choices were framed as 'your own' and 'defined by you', indicating a freedom of choice. However, the youth were also

expected to be 'responsible' in terms of abstaining from criminal behaviour, avoiding violence and managing (normatively acceptable) bodily and sexual borders. The staff worked with the young people to develop a morality in them that would produce remorse if transgressed, and taught the youth to use this morality as a barometer for self-governance and surveillance and a tool for becoming economically autonomous vis-à-vis the welfare state.

### *Collective responsibilities*

Other practices aimed at collective responsabilisation – for instance the staff's continuous establishment of a democratic community of decision-making among the young people, regarding both day-to-day matters (e.g. the dinner menu, activities and excursions) and structural matters of concern to the young participants (e.g. smoking rules, how to welcome new youth, and defining opening hours). Planning and preparing the daily dinner relied on the young people's initiative and participation, and shopping was an exercise in individual responsibility and self-governance for the common good. One staff member explained:

Wild [youth] requires wild solutions and the ability to think big, and continuously to give them responsibility. A small thing like for instance: 'Hey you are the ones who do the shopping, so here are 500 DKK [...]. You can easily do that – we expect you not to run away with the money, although it might be tempting. We all need food this evening too.'

Collective responsabilisation was also taught through the staff's facilitation of the youth's self-defined community identity: a common identity that set a normative framework that the participants not only identified with, but also committed to.

It is a process to learn to take responsibility for yourself. That one cannot blame others. But being a group treatment programme [...] also means that we value the community a lot, and the responsibility and ownership that we work on, we relate to this community. So it is a responsibility and loyalty towards the community that we work on, an exercise to be a part of a community [...] and being responsible to oneself at the same time as being part of something bigger than yourself.

(Staff5)

Finally, youth responsabilisation was practised through the delegation of (paid) 'assistantships' to older youth when the staff found this productive for their self-development. Assistants acted as internal role models and were responsible for sustaining common group norms and acting as the staff's 'eyes' – for instance when the programme engaged in external activities.

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### ***Dilemmas of youth responsabilisation***

Responsibilisation in the youth programme entailed both manipulating and emancipating elements (van der Land, 2014, p. 426), and it aimed at teaching the young people to voluntarily conduct their own lives responsibly by making autonomous choices. Such choices were decisions about their self-conduct that were surrounded by injunctions, promises and warnings, 'organised around the proliferation of norms and normativities' (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 205). Thus, self-development, self-governance and individual responsibility aimed at making the young people maximise their wellbeing, health, safety and quality of life in normatively sanctioned ways.

At the same time, responsabilisation aimed at stimulating and sustaining both collective resources and solidarity and active citizenship in order to replace dependence on the welfare state's services and professionals. These goals were realised by offering the young people the opportunity to participate in collaborative governance through community-based service planning and bottom-up problem solving. Such practices acted against the traditional welfare state's paternalising, clientising and stigmatising tendencies. However, they also tapped into a more general shift from the traditional welfare state social insurance principle ('socialised forms of risk management') to the individualisation of risk management, by approaching the young people's social problems and risks (e.g. criminality, violence and transgressive sexual conduct) as problems of self-care, from which the social work offered 'liberation' (Villadsen 2003).

### ***Practices of staff responsabilisation***

Staff responsabilisation appeared to be closely tied to the ideological and pedagogical goals of youth responsabilisation, and it involved continuous boundary work relating to the distribution of responsibility between staff and youth. This boundary work required staff to negotiate their practice of not only responsabilisation, but also de-responsibilisation. Both processes often involved restructuring the responsibility boundaries from between staff and youth to between staff and staff. The everyday professional work involved both self-governance and colleague governance, and required conflicting professional identities (traditional versus advanced liberal) and social pedagogical discourses to be negotiated and brought into balance.

### ***Responsibility mobilisation versus care***

The staff's processes of defining the areas and borders of responsibility between themselves and the young people took place, for instance, at the weekly staff meeting. In the following conversation, the dilemma of whether staff should offer the assistants help or teach them responsibility was discussed:

STAFF2: Mouna has difficulties with [her] role as assistant [...]. I am not sure how much we [should] leave it up to her to find her own space or whether we should define it for her.



STAFF3: Well in a way it is part of the very process that she is able to see where she is needed and to fill out that role. So I'd say, if we take charge of defining where she needs to fill in, we deprive her of the responsibility and possibility for development.

STAFF1: But if she is unable to see that herself – to define her own role as assistant – she gets nowhere at all, so if we don't step in we see no development whatsoever.

STAFF3: Year, but she gets no sense of personal success if we tell her how to do her job.

[...]

STAFF3: How about Rachel? I don't think we demand enough of her. What is our plan for her?

STAFF4: She does not take the responsibility. She wants to participate in the activities but still requires a reminder SMS. She still wants to behave like a small girl, and she gets away with that.

STAFF3: We cuddle her without demands and she comes here every day.

STAFF1: I am not happy about making requirements of her [...] maybe rather than making claims to her internal development, we should ask her to make external progress, in the situation around her, but I am afraid to make new demands she cannot meet.

The professional identity issues at stake here – presented as a choice between providing freedom to the assistants and providing care and protection to sustain their personal self-esteem by giving them an experience of success – were several and overlapping. One dilemma was between realising the traditional welfare professional role as client caregiver and realising the neoliberal professional role as motivator and mobiliser of self-development and self-governance. Another dilemma was between a critical pedagogical discourse of empowering the young people by granting them the right to self-define their assistant role and a neoliberal pedagogical discourse of user influence, which – if the young people were unable to realise it – could marginalise them from the central programme activities, capital and spaces of identification.

### *Responsibility for de-responsibilisation*

Facilitating the young people's self-governance through responsabilisation required the staff to continuously endeavour to let go of professional responsibility. According to one staff member:

It is very much about daring to let go as adults [...] clearly there are things that we must take care of, but we must also dare to let go of responsibility for everything. Well, I think that is the hardest move, and we are not equally good at that among the staff [...]. But to stop taking responsibility for the young people [and instead] create a space [for] a shared

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responsibility [...] it is so tempting to cook the food, call the social worker, also to take responsibility for each of them. The challenge [for social workers] is to endure the process.

Negotiations of when responsibility should and should not be taken were entangled in the dynamics of the staff's self-responsibilisation and their responsabilisation with colleagues, as exemplified by two staff members' planning of an exit activity for older youth:

STAFF5: Instead of we [the staff] only taking care of the emotional and personal aspects [of the exit], we need to train them in seeking information [...] information is actually out there and you have to seek the information yourself. That is what one does.

STAFF1: Yea, but it is a jungle [...] we should teach them: now you need to seek out contact with us [the youth programme] you have the responsibility for your relationship with the programme being vivid and relevant.

STAFF5: Responsibility – hell of a code word.

STAFF1: [writes 'responsibility' on a whiteboard]

Responsibilisation of the young people who were leaving the programme was defined as transferring to them not only individual responsibility for their future contact with the programme, but also – and more importantly – individual responsibility for actively replacing the programme with central state institutions, such as the job centre, the cash benefit office and the activation system: 'that lump [of institutions] which they, many of our young people, will get acquainted with', the two staff members agreed. However, the young people needed to learn the proper, responsible ways of engaging with these welfare institutions:

STAFF1: We have a responsibility of teaching them to take responsibility for these relations – the system requires them to be self-reliant and -supportive, also when they no longer attend the programme. So they have to be able to take the lead in these contacts too.

### *Individual and collective responsabilisation*

In the youth programme, the staff experienced this boundary work and de-responsibilisation as both individual processes of self-governance and collective responsibilities of other-governance. This is illustrated in the continued conversation about the exit activity:

STAFF1: Ahhh, I think we keep saying that word ['responsibility'] all the time.

STAFF5: We do?

STAFF1: But I react to it – you're right in using that word, and I write it, but I find we keep saying it, and ohh I'm so tired of it [Staff5 laughs] and fuck, they [the young people] are tired of me saying it.



STAFF5: So let me say it next time [...]. I guess you tend to take too much responsibility for how the young people react to the things we demand of them and try to teach them – things that you just have to let go of.

STAFF1: Thanks [both laugh].

STAFF5: Maybe you should take it up with the rest of us during supervision next time and we could look into how to take some of it [responsibility] off your shoulders. It's not good for any of us, if you keep blurring those boundaries for yourself and the rest of us – to be frank.

Letting go of responsibility in dealing with the young people was central in the staff's processes of defining and enacting (new) professional roles and identities. This identity work was sustained through continuous individual and colleague reflection during staff meetings and by undertaking collective psychological supervision on a monthly basis.

At the session following the exit activity meeting, Staff1 volunteered to be in focus. The supervision session structure was that first she would speak uninterruptedly about her issue and her desired colleague response; second, the psychologist would ask supplementary questions 'to get the narrative'; and third, the other staff members would take turns laying out their reflections on Staff1's narrative without being judgemental or questioning or disregarding her perspective and description.

Staff1 characterised her problem as one of confusion between her role as a caregiver and her responsibility to delegate in the process of

both say[ing] goodbye to some [the old participants who would be leaving the programme] and hello to other young people, and I get completely confused: What to do with whom? When do I do provide attention and care? When should they take action themselves? I get so exhausted.

During the round of responses from the other staff members, Staff5 once again introduced responsibility as the 'code word' for Staff1's confusion – a confusion not only about when to delegate what kind of responsibility, when to withdraw her own responsibility and how to distinguish between the two situations, but also a confusion over the collective staff responsibility:

STAFF5: She [Staff1] has a lot of responsibility right now, not only for the young people coming in and out of the programme, but also to supervise me as a new staff member, and also Jenny [an external staff member who ran an art project with some of the young people], and at the same time, half of it is misplaced, which is not visible at all [...]

STAFF2: How not visible?

STAFF5: I mean it is not visible to either her or the rest of us that this is a responsibility for not taking responsibility, that in fact Staff1 should do a better job in trying not to take responsibility for the young people leaving the programme, and for me and Jenny, who are here to learn ourselves.

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It obscures some of our basic job if we [the staff] take too much responsibility – or some of us do – from the young people or each other.

Ironically, while boundary work between the young people and staff and among the staff members appeared – and was discussed – as a recurrent pedagogical dilemma that staff had an individual and collective responsibility to solve, responsibility boundaries were often expected to be ultimately defined by the young people. Thus, the staff often considered it part of the young people's personal development that they were able to define a role for the staff in their life. This became obvious when the staff discussed whether a young man was suited to continue the programme:

STAFF3: Why does Raki need to be here at all? Are we good enough to make plans for him? What is efficient for him? He wants a vocational education, to be a carpenter, but we cannot count on the case worker finding a spot for him. Yet he doesn't use me as a sparring partner, so I doubt he takes the lead at all?

STAFF1: He uses me, but I do not just react to his wishes, I find him relatively in control of things, he comes here frequently, sticks to appointments, but when he does not define my role himself, I have doubts about whether it is my job or the social workers' to get him further in the system.

The pedagogical focus on youth influence and the development of self-government placed a responsibility on the young people to create a legitimate professional role for the staff in their life. This responsibility became invisible – or uncertain – when the young people did not show self-governance or acted too independently vis-à-vis the staff or other social system actors.

### Conclusions

Studying the processes of responsabilisation in youth social pedagogical work highlights the related dynamics of macro-level policy transformation, welfare discourses and the human and interactional accomplishments in everyday social work practices as they influence professional identities.

In the youth programme, a critical dimension of professional identity was defined by boundary work relating to defining and delegating responsibility and enacting appropriate responsabilisation vis-à-vis youth, oneself and colleagues. In these negotiations, the social pedagogues navigated and negotiated different ideological and professional values, such as the role of traditional welfare state professionals for providing inclusion and care and the role of the neoliberal state professional for facilitating and demanding user influence and responsibility.

While a central programme goal was to transfer responsibility from the staff to the young people, enabling them to take control of their social development and assimilate into society and welfare institutions, both the social

pedagogical objective and the role of staff in this process were disrupted. The staff continuously questioned their legitimacy as professionals and the legitimacy of social pedagogy and its basic concepts vis-à-vis the young people's lives. The recurring professional identity dilemma between the roles of care-giving and generating responsibility was often solved by defining youth responsabilisation (and staff de-responsibilisation) as the proper kind of care that social pedagogy could provide. Maintenance of a professional identity centred on youth responsabilisation required the staff to continuously strive for self-governance, which they supplemented with colleague governance. Thus, staff not only considered self-governance an individual responsibility owed to colleagues and the profession, but also considered colleague governance a collective staff responsibility aimed at supporting each individual staff member.

The consequences of these dynamics for the critical potential of social pedagogy and social pedagogical professional identities remain unclear. In Denmark, top-down political agendas of austerity and budget reductions, as parts of the neoliberal reorganisation of the welfare state, are often realised through standardised control measures. These measures are often promoted, hand in hand, with bottom-up, decentralised professional approaches aimed at empowering citizens and decreasing the traditional welfare state's paternalism through strengthening civil society and citizens' active participation. As this case illustrates, the neoliberal social policy paradigm is often boosted by critical discourses of professional social work. Historically, the concept of empowerment was part of critical northern European social pedagogy, adapting a mobilising collective (rather than an individualistic adaptive) approach. Empowerment had the goal of emancipation by raising clients' awareness of structural restraints and enabling them to develop the means of collectively combatting these restraints in everyday life (Eriksson, 2014, pp. 174–176). In this study, we saw the ideal of empowerment trapped between policy-defined goals of individual development and self-governance and collective norms and systems of support and sanctions, among both youth and staff. Moreover, we saw that while the users – such as the young people in the programme – were apparently delegated more power to access social services, the staff risked losing power in their professional work and identity.

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